

PHD THESIS SUMMARY

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# **Electoral Struggles and Elections in Budapest**

**1920–1939**

**Municipality, Party System and Elections**

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BUDAPEST, 2011

## **I. Choice of subject**

The examination of the Horthy era elections is usually part of a more comprehensive analysis of the whole political system, so the judgment on the electoral system and the political system is closely related. In the case of the political system the expert historians' opinion is basically the same: the era can be described as a transition between dictatorship and democracy, a parliamentary system with authoritarian (authoritative, autocratic) features. The party system and electoral system demonstrates this duality well: although the elections were multi-party elections, the ruling party had a hegemonic position with an absolute majority, ensuring its main goal of avoiding parliamentary rotation. Despite the fact that the suffrage was significantly greater than in the dualistic era, the vast majority of the voters had the opportunity to vote only in the open. If we examine the electoral system in detail and during operation we can find significant differences within. According to László Hubai (1998), in the constituencies in and around the capital there was secret ballot all along, and from 1922 on, all the major political movements could participate essentially freely, so the election was „moderately limited”. In the municipal towns with multiple mandates it was „limited”, while for voters in the country with open ballot there were „imitated elections”.

Budapest quickly became a truly contemporary metropolis in the era of dualism, its size and its role was significantly greater than the rest of the cities. In the eye of the contemporaries it was a different world within the country even before World War I, and the different economic, social and cultural processes had resulted in an independent municipal policy. However the key role Budapest played in the events of 1918 and 1919 changed its perception with the counter-revolution in power. This new perception, which got manifestation in the catchphrase „sinful Budapest”, seriously affected the country's new Right government and political leadership in its decisions. The capital got into a „hostile” environment, because the dominant economic and social factors, which separated it from the rest of the country, and which gave it a special nature, had not changed essentially. However the Right aiming at the creation of a „Christian Budapest” sought to restructure the capital politically.

These arguments give significance to the thorough analysis of the „moderately limited” municipal elections between 1920 and 1939 in the capital. There seems to be a fundamental conflict and inconsistency on the first approach: the modern Budapest was recognized and accepted by the central government as having broader political freedom than the rest of the country, which stretched the whole conservative, authoritarian system to the limits. The question is what problems did the fact cause in the functioning of the capital's political system

while the Right government did not want to give up its newly acquired control over Budapest, it faced the strongest opposition against its will just there, where it had the least opportunity to influence the electorate. To illustrate this point, the examination of the „local government” elections (according to the contemporary administrative authority, the so-called municipal elections) is the most adequate method. Those elections were designed to decide about the composition of the General Assembly of the Council Committee, the quasi parliament of the capital. The quandary of the Right government of the era was how to ensure its control over the capital with the secret ballot in operation. How did this, complemented by conflicts between the different national and local governments, affect the autonomy of Budapest.

The exploration of the capital’s parliamentary and municipal elections is a useful method to get a clearer picture about the government’s national and local methods in exercising power, about its approach to law, about its vision for the society. The basic question is, with what kind of special electoral rules and techniques (to use a contemporary expression what kind of "correctives") did the reigning party use to limit the manifestation of the free political will, for which the secret ballot was the most obvious vehicle, and to curb the influence of the political opposition. In addition, the electoral system was closely linked with the party structure and the electoral results, and these three factors, to varying degrees, mutually interacted. The extension of suffrage after the dualist era, the politics of „mass culture” transformed (essentially developed) the party structure in the capital. How did this process take place? National or local political parties dominated in Budapest? What was the organizing principle of the party system, how can we classify the different parties according to their views and ideologies?

The limitations of the electoral system appeared in the official election results, but because of the secret ballot, it affected mainly the distribution of the mandates between the parties, and less the distribution of the votes. Behind the votes obtained by the political parties there was an actual social support so the limitations of the electoral system notwithstanding, the results of the capital elections are suitable to examine the voting behavior. If we assume that the inter-war Budapest had lasting social and political cleavages, then they are reflected in election results and in the stability and continuity of those results. The question is whether the analysis and comparison of the different electoral and socio-demographic data confirm this cleavage hypothesis, and if so, what was the „electoral map” of the contemporary Budapest like.

All these questions are in the heart of this thesis. The overall theme, by nature, also affects many other areas of research, but they are, only partially connected to the main topic, for

example Budapest (social)history. Regarding the elections I am focusing on the main problems and less on the marginal issues, such as the history of specific elections or the features and changes in the candidates, mandates, and representatives of certain political parties.

## **II. Sources**

There were six general parliamentary elections (1920, 1922, 1926, 1931, 1935, 1939) and four municipal elections (1920, 1925, 1930, 1935) in Budapest during the examined period. The data of those elections are the primary sources to this subject, but to collect and sort the database is not an easy and trouble-free process. In the case of the parliamentary elections the basic research has already been carried out and the results were published by László Hubai in 2001 in a three-volume atlas. (The atlas contains the results of all the constituencies of Budapest.) The aggregate results of the municipal elections appeared in different publications, but a comprehensive, single-attribute data publication has not occurred so far. Therefore it was a prerequisite to create such a database for this research. The problems with the sources are similar in the cases of the countrywide and the municipal elections. The official records survived only in a few cases, so they have to be complemented with contemporary statistics and press reports. Fortunately both the Municipal Statistical Office and the Social Democratic Party of the period considered it important to disclose the election results, decomposed in many ways, which also allowed comparisons between different source types. The main principle in collecting voting data is that it has to be the most detailed, going down to the smallest electoral units, the so-called polling stations. In the case of the 1920 elections this was not feasible because the only thing that remained were the results from the constituency level. With the other elections I considered that primary source which provided extensive data broken down by polling stations. For the proper evaluation of the detailed results I needed information about the positions of the polling stations, and knowledge of the street directories. In the case of the 1920 and 1922 elections I did not find a source for that. Regarding the locations of the 200 and later 250 polling stations afterwards I did.

The records documenting the electoral process and the voting system survived only sporadically in the archived material of the Central Caucus, overseeing the parliamentary elections, and the the Certifying Caucus, responsible for the municipal elections. Official records from the 1939 elections are the most complete. There were post-election complaints,

which were prosecuted later and went through court, and their documentation can be found among the files of the Municipal Prosecutor's Office. The Municipal Statistical Office also dealt with electoral matters, especially problems concerning the compilation, supervision and characteristics of electoral rolls, so its archived material includes few relevant documents to my subject.

The electoral roll (or register) is a unique source type about the elections. It could be made before the election, by a special census, or in years between general elections correcting the existing data. While the total number of voters is available in the various statistics, the basic documents, the comprehensive electoral rolls, covering the whole Budapest, barely was survived. The first comprehensive register from the era, which is still available today, was made for the municipal election in 1930 by a special census. Further existing registers are for the 1935, the 1943 and the 1944 parliamentary elections, and all the three were compiled through the correction of previous rolls. The one from 1935 was actually used in a general election, while the ones made during World War II were obviously not. The following source type is closely related to the electoral roll: the socio-demographic statistics describing the main characteristics of the urban society were widely published in great detail by the Hungarian Central Statistical Office and the Municipal Statistical Office.

On the topics of the Municipality of Budapest, the local political process and the regulation of voting, the following source types are also available: the laws, the files of the Parliament, the protocols of the General Assembly of Budapest, the official publications of Budapest, the national and the local press, the memoirs of local politicians and collections of sources related to the history of Budapest.

### **III. Literature**

The subject of municipal autonomy and municipal elections is discussed in different extent in many books regarding the history of Budapest, but not in a comprehensive fashion. The legal background of the self-government was summarized by Sándor Tarjányi in 1972, the various subfields of research were presented in a collection of essays published by the Budapest City Archives in 1990. The connection between the self-government and political life of Budapest was the topic of many studies by András Sipos. The most recent, extensive piece of literature, mainly but not exclusively with a legal approach, was published in 2010 and was born out of Gábor Schweitzer's PhD thesis on the subject.

Each of the municipal parties and their activities in the City Hall are now well understood, primarily through separate works: Zsuzsa Nagy L. wrote a monograph in 1972 about the liberals, in recent years Jenő Gergely dealt with the local Christian Party, while Erika Varsányi examined the Social Democrats. Concerning the local ruling party no such work has been published yet, but the void can be filled by using the memoirs of contemporary politicians, especially Ferenc Harrer's. Although these monographs paint a fairly accurate picture about the political life of Budapest, they present it from the perspectives of the selected parties, so the municipal party structure as a whole has not been the subject of a separate investigation.

The restrictive factors in the parliamentary electoral system of the Horthy era and their impact were comprehensively discussed in a 1998 study by László Hubai. He presented the legal regulations and their consequences not chronologically, as usually made in historical summaries, but in a systematic manner, analyzing the certain factors separately. Of those factors he dealt not only with the well-known ones, as the restrictions of voter's right, the open ballot and the unanimous vote, but also with less-discussed issues, such as the disproportional division of electoral districts, the targeted changes in the system of mandate-allocation, the value difference between votes, and finally the high threshold for nominations and the use of deposit in the voting process. Neither the consequences of the electoral legislation in Budapest, nor the limitations of the municipal voting system has been analyzed comprehensively in earlier researches.

The voter behavior was examined in the literature based on a variety of sources and with a diverse approach, the difference being the result of the social structure, the chosen electoral results and the methods of comparison for those results. Meanwhile case studies were made in connection with specific localities, parties and/or election years, and most authors generalized their conclusions, extending them to the whole country and to the whole era. However the results are difficult to compare, because not only the studied areas, cities, political situations and local party-structures may differ, but the social classifications, formed groups, based on the same sources, can also be different. The researchers often identify distinct sets of social groups, and, though the name is the same, they mean something different in many cases. The disadvantage of case studies which deal with consecutive elections separately is that they fail to grasp the important question of continuity and change, namely what kind of long-term social and political divisions existed, and what attempts were made, successful or unsuccessful, to restructure them.

#### **IV. Methodology and structure**

The ten elections examined in the thesis have not been discussed independently in the literature. The parliamentary and the municipal elections in Budapest, spanning many decades, were discussed comprehensively in a book of essays published in 2010. These essays greatly illustrate the recurring phases of each electoral cycle: announcement of the election, nomination of candidates, campaign, voting process, distribution of mandates, complaints, repeated elections or by-elections. It would be not expedient to recapitulate this process in chronological order all over again, because a thematic approach and structure serve the examination of the questions raised better. I always applied the most adequate method and approach regarding the topics discussed in the thesis, whether it is historical, political or statistical.

The first chapter after the introduction describes the history of the municipality of contemporary Budapest in line with the subject. The regulation of the autonomy and its changes are well-researched, so the practical operation, the implementation of legislation, the conflicts between the national and local leadership, the political and electoral struggles are in the focus of my presentation. The second chapter provides essential historic background by summarizing the political parties and the party structure of the inter-war Budapest. After discussing the 1920 elections, which bears signs of temporality, the presentation breaks with the chronological narrative and deals with the various political parties and ideologies separately. The studies of László Hubai provide the groundwork for the presentation of the party structure and the classification of the parties, but in some cases I modified the general „party families” outlined by him because of the special political characteristics of Budapest. I primarily examine the parties according to their election results: how their support evolved based on changes in the political situation and in the voting system. The third chapter deals with the parliamentary and municipal voting system in Budapest, but focuses mainly on those special election rules and techniques, so called „correctives”, with which the Right government tried to curb the manifestation of free political will and with which it intended to reduce the political influence of the opposition. Not only the chronologically presented regulatory changes form the center of the analysis, but the implementation of the different „corrective” measures, their practical use, impact, and effect on the election results. The general characterization of the various „correctives” are complemented by examples and more detailed presentations of particular elections in which any such measure played an important role.

The fourth chapter deals with voter behavior, a research area in which traditional political history and social history can find common ground. Different from case studies typical in the literature so far, I am examining the voter behavior in Budapest not in a specific date, but during the entire era, focusing on general and comprehensive characteristics. The important question of continuity in election results had been raised by some researchers previously, but they haven't examined it using the most detailed data available and with mathematical and statistical tools. In the existing literature, the authors usually formed their ideas about the social structure based on occupational data, sometimes they took into account other socio-demographic factors, too. I have chosen a different path, because I have been looking for the dominant social divisions, which explain the actual political confrontations and conflicts. My starting point was the cleavage theory of the political science. The concept was explained by Lipset and Rokkan in a classic study from 1967 in which they isolated four types of cleavages: divisions between the state and church (more generally religious), the majority and minority cultures (ethnic), agriculture and industry (rural and urban), property and labor (capitalists and workers). The authors believe that these social cleavages were determining factors in the formation of European parliamentary party systems in the 20th century. This theory is clearly connected to the development of political participation, especially to the extension of the suffrage, which made the classical liberal parliamentarism, based on the participation of well-off citizens and voting restrictions, disappear. The cleavage concept is used, though not precisely defined, in some recent pieces of literature about Hungarian history between the turn of the century and World War I. In the case of the inter-war Budapest I slightly modified the basic types, and put emphasis on the division based on class and social status (the working class and bourgeoisie) and on the culture and religion (specifically the Christian and Jewish opposition) to analyze voter behavior.

A most important question concerning the research in voting history is how election results can be compared with socio-demographic data. On the level of the smallest electoral units (the polling stations) based on sources mentioned above, the election database is complete. The related electoral rolls however only contain limited data types (for comparison: gender, age, place of birth, occupation) from the whole of Budapest, and it would be a monumental task, considering the hundreds of thousands of people with voter eligibility, to create a parallel social database. It's much simpler to use the very detailed statistical publications from the era, but these documents, unfortunately, do not concern the same territorial electoral units. The two types of units, the statistical and electoral ones, overlap each other only in the high level of the ten (later fourteen) administrative districts. Seeking a more detailed comparison I



selected city parts, smaller than the historical districts, as units for which there is valid statistical data and for which election data can be aggregated with slight modifications. I compared the socio-demographic and election data from those city parts with various methods (bivariate correlation calculations, graphics). I complement the analysis with an overview of purposefully selected electoral registers where my aim is not to determine the exact figures but to identify the main features. The conditions of the sources for linking the election results with the socio-demographic data and electoral rolls are the best in the case of the 1930 municipal elections. Because my basic question was that which were the specific social and political cleavages in the Horthy era Budapest, the 1930 elections are the most appropriate in this respect, contrary to the oft-analyzed and in many ways special 1939 elections.

## **V. Results**

The history of the municipality of Budapest in the Horthy era was rich in national and local leadership conflicts. In the political struggle between the national and the municipal government, which were basically on the same political platform but had different interests, ultimately the former, while seeking centralization, prevailed. Budapest gradually lost its special rights, which had brought along preferred status before, during the dualistic era, and the autonomy of the city and the significance of the General Assembly, representing the electorate, were greatly reduced. In addition, the Right-wing government had to face a common problem: how ensure the domination of the Christian-national forces, the "appropriate" political leadership of Budapest with the secret ballot as part of the voting system. The main objective was, as in the case of the national parliamentary elections, to avoid the transfer of political control, to prevent the opposition's access to the governing majority. The timing, postponing or even the bringing forward of the elections were means to that end, so none of the municipal elections in Budapest were held on a predetermined date. The main tool to grant the government's intention was the special presence of members in the General Assembly who had clearly right-wing affiliations and got their mandate not by elections but under various pretenses. The proportion of such members increased steadily, they made up 40% of the General Assembly in 1935. The practical relevance of this method was the most important in 1925, when the Liberal-Social Democratic Alliance of the opposition won more than half of the seats, but supplemented by those special members the coalition of the Christian Party and the local governing party retained its majority. The 1925

election results made the government reconsider the system of non-elected members and broadened the role and proportion of such members. The regime enacted a new law for the capital in 1930, and the fresh legislation guaranteed the majority of the governing parties in the General Assembly even if the opposition won the municipal election with 70% of the vote, and thus eliminated the theoretical chance of a political takeover. The two right-wing party governing the capital won the absolute majority of the elected seats only in 1935.

In Budapest the hegemony of the Christian-national forces was maintained principally through the presence of the special members in the General Assembly, but there were several „corrective” devices, partly codified, partly not, which were suitable to limit the influence and the mandates of the opposition even in the course of the voting process. With the exception of the 1920 elections the suffrage was limited in the Horthy era, it was not general, and the women and men had not equal rights: typically only 30% of the capital’s population had the same basic political rights. In addition we cannot speak about slow, gradual extension of the suffrage: though the number of people who had the required „level of education” increased over time, the number of people with voting right showed stagnation and even decline. After 1922, under the same statutory provisions, it was the consequence of the „appropriate” compilation of the electoral rolls, in 1935 it was because the new registers weren’t compiled at all. The issue of the electoral rolls, which by default was an administrative affair, thus became a political issue, and provoked legitimate criticism by the opposition. The most flagrant case was the 1935 municipal elections, when electoral rolls five years earlier were made. Therefore some people, with the lack of legislative guarantees, could not exercise their right to vote despite the fact that they otherwise would have met the requirements. In the late 1930s further restrictions in requirements (age, education, residence) prevented the increase in the number of people eligible to vote. The second Jewish law of 1939 meant another violation of equality before the law, because it either denied a Jew the right to vote, or made it more difficult for her/him to exercise it. The official authorities often contributed to the intimidation of those voters whom they considered Jews. Beside the suffrage there were other „correctives” in the electoral system. The high thresholds for nominations limited the number of parties which could participate in the municipal elections: there was a constituency where a party could participate only with the support of 10% of the local voters. The authorities usually provided too little time for the parties to collect nominations, so not just the smaller parties, but often social democrats and liberals with strong actual support also were unable to participate in all the constituencies. Determining the outlay of a constituency, the corresponding mandates and the mandate-distribution were also eminent political issues,

because the Right intended to use every minor method to obtain more and more seats in the General Assembly.

Despite the limited suffrage and the voting system, which was far from guaranteeing a level playing field, there was a real and measurable social support behind the political parties and movements in the inter-war Budapest due to the secret ballot. Because the parliamentary and municipal elections featured basically the same parties, albeit sometimes with different names, the joint examination of the results is warranted. The distinct party structure of Budapest, if somewhat hidden, already showed in the 1920 elections: the three major parties with significant public support were the Christian Party, the Social Democrats and the Liberals. The extended suffrage, the turn-out of the new voting masses and the proportional party list system equally helped to create a new party system in 1920 (and 1922) in which larger, all-Budapest parties were established, and prompted them to form alliances during elections with joint lists. A detailed examination of the election results shows strong socio-political cleavages between the main political trends. The liberal parties of Budapest had the support of the Jewish voters, they were practically limited to their support, and there was no substantial difference between the Democrats of Vázsonyi and the organizations related to Károly Rassay. The base for the Social Democrats, a typical class party, was comprised primarily of low-status voters working in the private sector. The Christian Party was the most akin to a traditional popular party, which, next to the Christian elite and the urban citizenry sought to attract the support of lower-status employees from the public sector, from state and municipal institutions and companies. In the mid-1920s the new, centrally organized ruling party joined the fray. The new organization's aim was to change the power relations, to cross the consolidated Jewish-Christian cleavage and to create a mixed political camp of urban citizens, but it failed. The municipal government party was at first a narrow elite party, then, by accepting the existing cleavages and following the similar objective of the Christian party, gradually increased its social support, focusing particularly on the public sector. The improved election results of the Right were likely attributable to its success in deepening the divisions between the public and private sectors, and to its growing ability to push back the Social Democrats to their narrow base. It is no question that the exploitation of the voting system also greatly contributed to the Right's electoral success. In spite of this between 1925 and 1935 a high-level of stability characterized the power relations among the main political trends: the Right and its Left opposition (the Social Democratic and Liberal parties) possessed a similar, close to 50% support among the voters. The spatial distribution of support, the structure of the political geography was also similar, and all parties could mobilize primarily

their own camp from time to time. The compulsory vote and the effective mobilization resulted in massive turn-outs in the elections usually up to 90% of the voters participated. (The official figures do not reflect this, because we can compare the number of the voters only with data from the often inaccurate electoral rolls.) A major reorganization of the party structure occurred, after a solid decade, in the 1939 parliamentary elections, when the new Extreme Right movement emerged as a major political force. This development made the Jewish-Christian cleavage more pronounced, while the Far Right extended its influence to the bases of the Social Democrats and the two major Right parties. The prior division between the public and private, at least in the case of the Extreme Right, lost its political significance.

## VI. Relevant publications

1. The Development of the Autonomy of Budapest in the Horthy Era . In: *Autonomies in Hungary 1848–1998*. Ed. by Jenő Gergely. ELTE BTK, Budapest, 2004. pp. 73–87.
2. Power Tools for „Correcting” the Will of Voters. Principles and Practice of the Municipality Election System in Budapest during the Horthy Era (1920–1944). *Múltunk*, 2005/1. pp. 210–237.
3. The Local Government and the Public Administration in Budapest, 1873–1989. In: *Autonomies in Hungary 1848–2000*. Volume I-III. Ed. by: Jenő Gergely. Introduced, collected by: András Cieger, Jenő Gergely, Károly Ignác, József Kardos, Kálmán Rác, Attila Réfi, Péter Strausz, Péter Krisztián Zachar. ELTE Graduate School of History and L'Harmattan, Budapest, 2005. pp. 63–65., 79–82. and 99–101.
4. The 1945 Elections in Budapest. In: *Our Forbidden History 1945–1947*. Ed by.: János Horváth. Osiris, Budapest, 2006. pp. 44–55.
5. About the Historical Literature of the Voting Behavior (Hungary, 1920–1947). *Múltunk*, 2006/1. pp. 90–98.
6. Municipal Elections and The General Assembly of the Council Committee in Budapest, 1920–1945. In: *Urbs. Urban History Yearbook of Hungary II. 2007*. Budapest City Archives, Budapest, 2007. pp. 201–226.
7. The Takeover by the Christian Party in City Hall – 1920. In: *Municipal Elections in Budapest, 1867–2010*. Ed by: István Feitl – Károly Ignác. Napvilág, Budapest, 2010. pp. 56–69.
8. The Overthrow of the Ruling Party – 1935. In: *Municipal Elections in Budapest, 1867–2010*. Ed by: István Feitl – Károly Ignác. Napvilág, Budapest, 2010. pp. 111–129.